

DICTATOR OF THE LODZ GHETTO

The Strange History of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski

SOLOMON F. BLOOM

A FEW years ago a tremendous and extraordinary catastrophe struck the Jewish people. We are not in any danger of forgetting it, but rather of fearing to think about it and discounting it, as it were, as the consequence of one of the many "isms" that lie ready to hand: fascism, sadism, the last-stage-of-capitalism, militarism gone mad, and so on. For our age abhors the unexplained event. Better a dozen theories than one obstreperous fact. We are in the way of

EACH individual whose fate contributed to the frightful total of physical and moral destruction wrought by the Nazis had a separate life and a separate story; there is no end to the stories, and yet each is unique. Here SOLOMON F. BLOOM tells of one man who chose to make of the disaster a personal opportunity: Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, Jewish "dictator" of the Lodz ghetto, who yet, perhaps, managed to deceive himself about the true nature of the role he played; and whose awful figure has much to teach us of the power of degradation the Nazi terror had, and the dreadful depravities of which our common human nature is capable. In a note asking permission to reprint this study in *Les Temps Modernes*, the editor, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, makes this comment: "The case of Lodz is especially important because it shows that the mechanism of Nazi power is the same even when it relies upon Jewish assistance; and that the passions which support such a power are the same, even when they grow in the mind of a Jew." Dr. Bloom, professor of history at Brooklyn College, collected much of the material for this article during a recent visit to Europe. He is the author of *The World of Nations: A Study of the National Implications in the Work of Karl Marx* (1941), and has contributed to many scholarly journals as well as to past numbers of COMMENTARY. His most recent article was "The Liberalism of Louis D. Brandeis" in our October 1948 issue. Dr. Bloom is writing an interpretative history of the larger forces that molded Europe and the United States between the American and the Russian revolutions.

killing true knowledge by premature understanding. Far from being comprehended, the Jewish catastrophe, and all the other Nazi horrors, bid fair to tease us out of thought, as the poet said, alas, of beauty and eternity.

These are matters of which it is important to know everything before concluding anything, not to speak of judging. And yet, the tragedy is unfamiliar to us in most of its crucial details. Particularly unfamiliar is the action and reaction of the Jews and their leaders on the spot. We have heard something, and not enough, of the resistance of various ghettos, and notably of the glorious rebellion of the Jews of Warsaw. But we have learned little of other, border-line cases, where resistance was mixed with a numb despair and a hope too long drawn out.

Such a case was that of the ghetto of the industrial city of Lodz, in Poland, which had the special misfortune to be ruled, from beginning to annihilation, by Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski.

IT is easy to say, and yet both true and inadequate, that the meaning of Rumkowski's strange career lay in embodying the limitations of the societies it spanned, the Polish-Jewish community and the Nazi order. Otherwise an undistinguished man, he was able to do that in a drastic manner indeed.

Endowed with many incongruous abilities and propelled by overflowing passions, Rumkowski came naturally into a tense commerce with the world. He was already in his late fifties when he acted out his ambiguities in an almost adolescent pantomime. For many years he had sold insurance and managed a Jewish orphan asylum. Both occupations, pursued with conspicuous energy, merged in a continuous solicitation, whether of premiums or contributions, from the same wealthy citizens of Lodz. He practiced an all-too-familiar type of persuasion

and salesmanship affected with a public interest.

Rumkowski found time also to become a character. He had made the easy discovery that many an enriched Jew—the industries of Lodz had grown phenomenally and raucously—lacked the courage of his accumulation and could be shouted out of his money. He became notorious for an impudent persistence that kept the orphanage in funds. When he did not play wrathful prophet to the rich, he paraded his love for children. The affection was as genuine as the parade: he was a widower with none of his own. He liked to surround himself with his charges, although he apparently drew the circle a bit close. It was whispered that he was guilty of familiarities with grown girls and women employed in the institution. There is even a report of a legal prosecution mysteriously dropped before it came to trial.

Certain it is that Rumkowski governed his institution with an ungloved iron hand, ignoring the wishes of contributors and co-workers alike. Money-raising tells for too much in the Jewish community, whether in Poland or the United States. Righteous table-thumping is always indulged. Nevertheless, Rumkowski could not go far in such a community as Lodz. His manners were rude and his learning nil. Despite the strength of his personality, he was condemned to a negligible influence, more annoying than pernicious.

The Nazis, however, tempted him with a vast opportunity. Lodz fell without a blow barely a week after the war broke out in September 1939. It was bound to be a city of special interest to Germany. With its twelve hundred enterprises and two million spindles, it had long been famous as the Manchester of the East. In a century, it had grown from a village to a city of nearly three-quarters of a million people, next to Warsaw the largest in the country. Here the Germans and the Jews repeated their traditional common role in Eastern Europe: they rather than the Poles had developed Lodz. In addition to nearly a quarter of a million Jews, the population included about ninety thousand Germans, the largest "Nordic" island in the Polish sea.

In Lodz as elsewhere, the Nazis invited the Jews to perpetrate their own spoliation and even immolation. This saved time,

work, and money, and preserved "order," by reducing to a minimum the confrontation of tyrant with victim. Setting Jew against Jew created a diversion, degraded them, and confirmed the Nazis in their faith that man relishes brutality. The organized and autonomous community—complete, as everywhere in Eastern Europe, with powers of taxation, sanctions, and even political parties—was to carry out the commands of the conqueror. The community was organized democratically, but when the Nazis said community they meant the leader.

How they came to think that in Lodz the leader was Rumkowski is something of a mystery. He was a Zionist member of the elected council, and not an influential one. A month after the occupation, an officer burst into the council chamber and demanded to speak to the "*Aelteste der Juden*," which was taken to mean the oldest member. Rumkowski, with his large head and white mane, was singled out, or he stepped forward. This account is probably folklore, and contains more *Galgenhumor* than information. In *Hurban Lodz*, Israel Tabakblatt, a survivor, reports the more likely version that Rumkowski intrigued behind the scenes for his elevation.

HE WAS invested with a kind of *Fuehrerschaft* but his powers did not reach their fullness until the Jews were shut off in a ghetto. For half a year the Nazis contented themselves with ordering them from the better streets, labeling them with the Star of David, displacing them in the better homes and businesses with *Volksgeossen*, whose numbers were swollen by Baltic emigrants; drafting them for forced labor, and engaging in rapine and shooting both organized and informal. This "liberal" regime came to an end in February 1940. First in Lodz and then in other cities—for the smaller towns were simply depopulated—the Germans revived the ghetto and degraded it to depths unplumbed in medieval days.

The Jews were driven from all parts of the city and herded into the Balut district in the north. Like all industrial centers, from Manchester to Pittsburgh, Lodz was overcrowded and jerry-built. A native writer has described it as "the most offensively ugly" of Polish cities and "most monstrously un-

hygienic," and a native poet was reduced to this apostrophe:

*Let Sorrento, Ganges and Crimea
Exalted to the heavens be.
But give me Lodz: its very dirt
And smoke are sweeter far to me.*

And nowhere was Lodz less lovely than in the slums of the Balut.

Thousands of Jews had somehow succeeded in fleeing the city, for the Nazi system took some time to jell, and the remaining 160,000 were pressed into 25,000 to 42,000 rooms—the estimates vary—or four to six in a room. The Germans then complained that the Ghetto was dirty. A sensitive police chief observed that "an indescribable odor" lay over the whole of it and that the Jews were covered with filth; he used a stronger word. Another official blamed the conditions on the "*niedrige Wohnkultur dieses Volkes*."

Characteristically, the Nazis approached the denouement of isolation only gradually, always encouraging the belief that the worst had come and gone, in order to forestall the resistance of flat despair. No hope abandon until it is too late. For a time, Poles were allowed into the Ghetto on business and Jews could leave during the day to work in the city. Then the gates were barred; nobody could come or go. The ten miles of wall and barbed wire which enclosed the Ghetto were patrolled night and day by soldiers. More than one Jew was killed, sometimes in sheer exuberance or jest, while merely passing along these walls. Only German guards and officials could penetrate hell and still emerge to purgatory.

IN THESE forbidden precincts the authority of Rumkowski blossomed forth. He assumed the title of *Der Aelteste der Juden in Litzmannstadt-Getto* and the Polish title of *Prezes*. He received full power to maintain "an ordered social life." He alone was to maintain relations with German officials, and through them with the planet. He was to control the property of the Ghetto, judge and punish the inhabitants, and even execute them. Under this autocracy a shadow state arose with all the panoply of the real. The panoply plays here the role of the precise detail in *Gulliver's Travels*: it persuades

us, for a moment, that the fantasy is true. But the meaning of Swift lies elsewhere, and so does that of Rumkowski's state.

It began with a budget rather than a social contract. Rumkowski levied a kind of single tax, making ordinary rent his fisc. But it appeared that too many of his subjects, bereft of jobs and incomes, were rather in need of relief themselves. Rumkowski thereupon ordered all currency and foreign remittances converted into his own fiat money, which became the only legal tender in the Ghetto. He decreed the sale of jewels, furs, and other valuables against the new paper. With some of the wealth—for most of it was siphoned off by the Nazis without any return—he imported food, doled out relief, bought raw materials, and organized an elaborate administrative apparatus. All the money issued by this state brought into being by the swastika was adorned with the menorah and the star of David and bore the signature of Rumkowski, florid with curlicues.

After money, force. (How much simpler it is to organize a state than to improve a society!) Rumkowski recruited twelve hundred police, a corps of plain-clothesmen for investigations, confiscations, and secret arrests, and a private guard. His chief of police made himself notorious for cruelty and venality. Judges, jails, even corporal punishment, completed the scheme of coercion. The *Aelteste* reserved an "administrative" power of arrest, the right of seizure by direct oral command, and the right of grace and amnesty. His "monarchy" was not limited as far as the Ghetto was concerned. One might have said "empire," for he also controlled a "colony" of Gypsies doomed by the Germans to a speedy extermination.

At once more ornamental and useful was the Ghetto Post Office and its stamps. In its first year, it cleared 135,063 parcels from other parts of Poland and 14,299 from abroad, 64,049 incoming money orders worth 1,699,151 marks, 10,238 telegrams, and more than a million letters and cards. The mails were quite efficient, although there were occasions when the ruler had to acknowledge the receipt of whole carloads of parcels that the Germans whimsically kept for themselves. In compensation, Rumkowski let himself go philatelically. On one stamp, his white-aureoled and bespectacled

image, softened by court artists, peers out of a star of David, imposed on a menorah. Or he surveys imperially the symbols of economic fertility: an industrial wheel against the background of smoking chimneys, a compass and carpenter's knife, and the all-important cotton bobbin.

The strongest arm of power, stronger than Jewish police and German Gestapo, was the control over food and jobs. "You can look into anything you wish and give your opinion, except the offices of food administration and personnel," Rumkowski warned his appointed council. "I alone will distribute food and name officials." Rations were lower and prices higher in the Ghetto than outside, although this was not entirely his fault, since the Germans paid him little for finished goods and charged him exorbitantly for imports. The Jews were exploited several times over. As a result, starvation was common and semi-starvation quite general. Their effect, as usual, was disease even more than hunger. Tabaksblatt remarks that "if any Ghetto Jew says that he ate his fill even once in those two years [of the "autonomous" state] he is lying." Both he and Dr. Albert Mazur, another survivor, mention cases where families concealed their dead in order to collect the extra ration. I spare the reader the details. (This practice was common in concentration camps: one lived off the dead, as it were.)

In a few years the Nazis could have killed all the Jews by this "cold" pogrom alone: but they were people in a hurry. A diary records that on July 5, 1942, 105 persons died and five were born: on the 27th the figures were 113 and zero. Even as the population was being reduced by mass deportation the death rate rose sharply: 1940: 6,851; 1941: 11,437; 1942: 18,020.

The feeding of the Ghetto, such as it was, depended largely on its productiveness. Old industries were revived and new factories set up. One of the reasons why the Nazis tolerated the existence of the Ghetto as long as they did was their need for manufactures. Eventually most of the factories worked to supply the Wehrmacht. "*Unzere passport iz di arbeit*," was one of Rumkowski's frequent slogans. He was proudest of his accomplishments in this field. The calendar printed in the Ghetto carefully records the anniversaries of the

establishment of the various industries. The initial difficulties were indeed considerable: on the principle of grab rather than efficiency, the Nazis had removed the machines and tools of the Balut; the Ghetto contained too many unskilled persons; orders were at first few and raw materials lacking; exchange and barter trickled through sclerotic official arteries. In the first year, only fifteen to twenty per cent of the people could find work; the rest hungered on a sketchy relief. In the factory, as in the street, the iron hand ruled. The second issue of the *Getto Zeitung*, the official newspaper, announced plainly that "the Ghetto does not work by the clock." It did not.

What may have encouraged Rumkowski to believe, as he did, that he would be instrumental in saving a remnant of Polish Jewry was his ability to organize not only workshops but also hospitals and schools. He assembled medical personnel and supplies, although the German officials saw to it that his success here was tragically inadequate. They allowed him to improvise a whole school system. In the first spring, he gathered 7,366 boys and girls in primary schools, and 728 in secondary. The figures were doubled in the following year. The curriculum reflected the new conditions: religious instruction was strengthened, German could not be taught to the "inferior race," and Yiddish supplanted Polish, which had generally been the language of instruction, in the primary grades. The Ghetto was Jewish in a Yiddish sort of way, if one may say so. Rumkowski indulged the children with extra rations, sweets, and holiday gifts. His old professional interest stood him in good stead. The survivors concede quite generally that his devotion was authentic.

SUCH were the institutions of this crepuscular state. It was not precisely a Nazi state, for Jews cannot be brought to believe in invidious natural distinctions among themselves, and cannot make a virtue of brutality. But it resembled its progenitor in autocracy, servility, and corruption. The Nazi system bred a shrewd synthesis between systematic robbery as a matter of state policy and spontaneous rapine by subordinates and menials. A common interest made easy bedfellows of those two irrecon-

cilable rivals of the manuals of political science: the individual and the state. Rumkowski appointed complaisant and self-seeking officials, and thus deprived the community of a responsible and competent public service. He showered them with opportunities for extortion and graft. Let no one think that there is no room in the shadow of death for accumulation and ostentation. Mammon long ago discovered that even Hell "wants not her hidden luster."

The members of the official apparatus ate well and concealed food for speculation and private security. Not a little was spoiled through too much prevision. There was no check over distribution—Rumkowski himself did not know how much came in or went out—with imaginable results. Money hoards have been uncovered. There are reports of orgies, both alimentary and sexual.

Rumkowski was wide open to the temptation of the flesh—that was an old story. Although during his "reign" he married a young woman of good family and half his age—a king must have a queen and if possible a dynasty—he was not averse to attending the inflammable festivities of his creatures. But, unlike them, he was not mercenary. He was captivated rather by the psychological and political perquisites of his strange and—he dared to think—promising role. Like all dictators he affected to despise politics, to love order, and to protect his loyal subjects. His favorite word was *ruh*, his goal *ruh in ghetto*. He was given to referring to "my children," "my workers," "my factories," and even "my Jews." He indulged the language of command. When nurses asked for a reduction of their inhuman working hours, he threatened to "crush" their "obstinacy." In decreeing shorter clothes for men to save material for patches, he announced that he "would carry out this plan of mine one hundred per cent and will not stop at anything, as is my custom." He meddled with religious rules: on calling on a bereaved man to return to his shop, he declared, with an unconscious pun, that "in these times it is permissible to sit *shiva* [seven mourning days] four days."

In tune with his times, Rumkowski encouraged a kind of *Fuehrer* worship. The calendar of the Ghetto (printed incidentally on the back of advertising sheets for coffee,

the original business of Hans Biebow, the *Leiter der Gettoverwaltung*) recorded only one historical date apart from the inauguration of industries—the birthday of the *Aelteste*. By an ironic chance, this fell on Purim, the festival of liberation from Haman. Rumkowski's concern for the young was effectively exploited by his political machine. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah 1942, he was presented with a large album, bound in hard wood and leather, containing the good wishes of the whole school system. The clear signatures of 14,587 pupils and 715 teachers, carefully numbered, may be read in the original copy now in the archives of the Yiddish Scientific Institute—Yivo—in New York. It is perhaps the most accurate roll of the martyrdom of the war. The list of each school is preceded by a prayer or verse, generally in Yiddish but occasionally in Hebrew or Polish. The parchment frontispiece hails Rumkowski as *Adonenu Ha-Nasi* (our lord, our prince), and praises him: *Atah Nasi deag lanu* (you, our prince, provide for us). I translate a few verses at random:

*You lay down your life for us,
The end of your striving, we.*

*Stern of visage but mild of heart,
Your blood is shed for every child.*

*From purest well, the hearts of children,
Flow a thousand blessings upon your handsome head.*

IT WAS on his own *Getto Zeitung*, the only publication permitted to the community, that Rumkowski relied for the most Byzantine appreciation. The eighteen issues of this newspaper which appeared between June and September 1941 (they too can be read, in tiny photostatic reproductions, in the rich archives of the Yivo) present him as the model of an able and benevolent ruler: he feels "a sense of responsibility for everything that goes on in the Ghetto"; he is the only *kenner* of its problems; stern and just—the reporter does not envy the unfortunates who dare to lie to him—he unbends frequently; his countenance then becomes mild and genial, from his eyes "streams love," and a smile steals upon his lips; "it is then as if a familiar and quiet dove, gently

flapping its wings, warms and cuddles its little ones. . . ."

Prose was not enough. In the very first issue of the *Zeitung*, L. Berman sang, significantly, the praise of "The Strong Arm":

*Our President Rumkowski
Is blessed by the Lord above
Not alone with brains and talent
But with a firm and powerful arm.
Whether in offices or shops
Work is thorough, exemplary.
All is bound, all related
By the President's strong arm.
And at Dworska Number 20 [the central
office]
Toil is always going on.
Whoever thinks of lying down
Feels the President's strong arm.
All the wilder elements
Have been put against the wall.
Peace and order reign in Ghetto
Only thanks to his strong arm.*

But, again it was Rumkowski's love of children that touched most the laureate heart:

The President Rides Forth

*Men and women, young and old,
Crowds gather here and there,
Everybody is pressing hard:
The President rides forth.
Now his fine gray-spotted horse
Suddenly comes to a halt,
And the mass is lighted up
By his head of silver hair.
All eyes and all hearts
Turn to him.
And the people strain and stretch
With petitions in their hands.
But the President is busy
And he sees no one now.
He has spied and stopped to chat
With a tiny child of seven.*

Engulfed by adulation, Rumkowski took to posturing. He affected the flowing cloak, shining boots, the imperious cane. The same gray horse always drew his carriage. On the first Rosh Hashanah in the Ghetto, in 1940, he went to the synagogue in state, clad in a long white cloak, adorned by a hand-worked silver collar, similar to the

Talith Hatorah, and crowned with a blue and white hat with eight points. He was accompanied by a suite of higher officials; crowds and police lined the streets and inclined in a *Gut Yom Tov*, occasionally sardonic, as he passed them in review. His court artists portrayed him throwing his cloak protectingly over the children of the Ghetto, who look up adoringly to him, or brooding over the problems of the Ghetto in the dead of night.

When everyone rested he alone waked, worked, endlessly planned. He felt lonely and unappreciated. "I am ever disturbed in my work," he announced plaintively. The poet's petitioners were a nuisance to his hero. Vulgar milling has "a bad effect upon a man who works hard and has little time to rest." He thundered that he would disregard such petitions even if, in a moment of weakness, he accepted them. They must be dropped in a special box at his office. "The Lord knows that I would like to please everyone but where shall I get the means? I know very well that many people abuse my affection for children—they are the only ones who never disturb me in my work—and some people smuggle petitions through them. I will put an end to that too."

Now and then, the abnormality implicit here would break through with violent clarity. As the Jews were driven from Lodz to the Balut, he is said to have sat in his office contemplating the possible titles he might assume as the chief of the new Ghetto. He yielded to sudden passions. He might berate people in the streets, or apply his cane, or, again, order a beard which displeased him summarily cut. He once struck a physician. Just as suddenly he might become overcheerful and ebullient and ooze goodwill. He might break out in song. Sometimes contrition seized him. He showed up at a gathering of physicians and their families, uninvited and unwelcome, and proceeded to justify his rule: They say I am a dictator; that is not true; my ambition is to save a remnant and future Jewry will be beholden to me; only history will be able to judge my work which, in perspective, will be shown to have been beneficent. And so forth.

THE story of Rumkowski's state is not of course the whole story of the Ghetto.

His policy, or any other, could not hope to exhaust society. Through the crevices of his obscurantist despotism, spontaneous effort burst in all its forms: reading circles, recitations, amateur theatricals, little orchestras, lectures, literary evenings.

*And as the desert hath green spots, the sea
Small islands scattered amid stormy waves,
So that disastrous period did not want
Bright sprinklings of all human excellence.*

Incredible as it may seem, literary and other artistic production went on, although the results disappeared with their creators. A few pieces remain. For example, some verses of the sensitive Hasidic poet S. Shayevich, from which I quote:

*The Lord has showered even us with gentle
hand:
A double gift—
The death-decree and spring.
The garden blooms, and the sun shines.
And the slaughterer slaughters. . . .*

*But we crave no recompense or mercy.
For when you slay a man
You slay his God as well.*

Nothing could stifle Jewish humor and ridicule. Deportation orders were "invitations to a wedding" (*chasene kartlech*); as the Eastern front drew near, it seemed that "help is behind your back, death in front of your nose." The story goes that once in performing a marriage, for which he bestowed an extra ration of food, Rumkowski put the usual question "Do you love her" and the swift reply came: "Meantime I am hungry. . . ."

At first, Rumkowski hoped to secure the support of intellectuals. He was soon disillusioned. The more decent elements waged an unrelenting warfare, necessarily muffled and in the end hopeless, against his machine. Satirical poems and songs were circulated clandestinely, and political sketches shown. In turn, as I. Spiegel, one of the few surviving writers, puts it, Rumkowski "did everything he could to break the writer's pen and the painter's palette." He censored plays and vaudeville acts, denied writers precious paper and ink, withdrew the rations of some, and spied upon others. The Ger-

mans finished the job. When Rumkowski approved the production of a play—its name was, of all things, *Es vet sein besser!*—the Germans dispersed the audience. Along with virtually everything else, they confiscated the musical instruments of the Ghetto. Occasionally the strains of an illegal violin wafted through the night and made dictators uneasy.

POLITICAL work was more dangerous, for politics naturally meant opposition. Unfortunately, the various parties were unable to merge their energies. The Zionist factions cooperated to further cultural, athletic, and economic activity; indeed they pointed the way to Rumkowski in reconstructing life in the Ghetto. Another coalition, that of the Left, was weaker: even the Communists were divided. And little wonder, for the inauguration of the Ghetto fell in the period of the notorious pact of friendship between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, when, in Molotov's words, Nazism was "a matter of taste." His taste.

Moreover, Rumkowski handled the opposition with ferocity. He censored mail and controlled the printing press. He did not hesitate to ask the Germans to send troops into the Ghetto to shoot down demonstrators, for in the early days there were not wanting both strikes and public demonstrations of protest. Fishermen, butchers, and coachmen particularly distinguished themselves in challenging his police, and Rumkowski visited upon them a refinement of revenge. He thrust the "Three F's" (*fisher, fleisher, fuhrmenner*) into the first batch of deportees demanded by the Nazis; later, when women were deported, he argued persuasively that unattached persons be given "preference," and their widows—for the men were of course never heard of again—were thereupon shipped out. And finally, when the Nazis asked for children, the orphans of the "Three F's" were given the same "preference" on the same grounds.

Such methods went far to paralyze the will to resist. But there were still other factors than the Rumkowski machine that prevented Lodz from repeating the rebellions in Warsaw, Vilna, and elsewhere. The Ghetto there was more tightly sealed, and it proved impossible to obtain the necessary weapons. The Jews were surrounded by

Germans as well as Poles and this rendered communication with the outside world most difficult. Two messengers sent to Warsaw for help in the winter of 1942-3 never returned.

Of daring there was plenty. There were explosions of individuals who met outrage with a desperate and lonely violence. With a quieter courage, people in their thousands—distinguished and ordinary—refused to break down morally, whatever the provocation. Simply to persist in remaining human exacted the highest act of faith. There were Orthodox Jews who would not touch "unclean" food and so invited a double doom. Although it smelled of death to own a radio or repeat its reports, hundreds of people joined to spread news in concentric waves every day. The radio was the only hint that the world still existed. The *Getto Zeitung* carried only local news. "It was through radio reports that the Ghetto heard of the mass butchery of the Jews of Cracow, Lublin, Warsaw, and other cities; it was through radio reports that they bewailed their own deported families, which perished in Kolo, Khelmno, and other places." In 1941 twelve men were arrested, but radio reports continued to be spread. Finally, on the eve of the final liquidation of the community in 1944, a young scoundrel led the Gestapo to the secret radios. One of their owners, Nathan Widavsky, a leading Zionist who was acquainted with the underground activists, took his life by painful poisoning, lest he break under torture and reveal their identities. The informer was later beaten to death by Jews in a concentration camp, the common destination of good and bad.

THESE were but the incidental expenses of Rumkowski's brittle glory. The higher price was exacted by the Nazis. His authority was distinctly delegated, delegated on a leash. Dictator of the community, he was a slave to his masters, as they were to theirs. For police matters he was responsible to the Gestapo and its counterpart for criminal work, the equally ill-famed Kripo. For economic and general administrative matters he was responsible to Hans Biebow, who became German *Leiter der Gettoverwaltung* upon the establishment of the closed quarter. Biebow had been recommended highly as a Nazi of spotless faith, and found the

grinding of Jews much more lucrative than the coffee business in which he had been engaged for eighteen years. He was executed, for his myriad crimes, by an Allied court in 1947.

But Rumkowski was not only a subordinate executive, he was also, inescapably, a Jew, and no Nazi was so low as to owe him deference. This was brought home to him early in his "reign." The Nazis, with that cynical adherence to legality which was their concession to German propriety, had told Rumkowski to secure a council to advise and assist him. Of course there was no question of election. Rumkowski simply informed the nineteen members of their appointment. They were abler men and better regarded than himself. Before long, they were summoned to the Gestapo and beaten, tortured, and blackmailed. Rumkowski, who always had physical courage, rushed to protect them. Sovereignty was quickly abashed. The troopers fell upon him too, and the Polish Mayor of Lodz barely rescued his life. The council disappeared *spurlos* and Rumkowski appointed another, remarking significantly that "acceptance of the mandate is compulsory." On a later occasion, when he was well established and fat with power, he was invited to Biebow's house, where the German master, in his cups, beat him, apparently for the fun of it. This incident was confirmed to me by the young physician, now in America, who treated Rumkowski's wounds after the "audience."

The real tribute the Germans exacted was more tangible than dignity. It was property, men for work, and men for the death machines. Rumkowski had to help the Germans squeeze out the valuables of the community. Thousands were sent off to toil—on private as well as public enterprises, under murderous conditions—and never to return. German employers paid 0.70 Reichsmarks a day per slave to a special account of the German administration of the Ghetto. It was from this account that the henchmen were paid for snatching other Jews for extermination.

Even before the Ghetto was set up the Germans made a demand for twenty-five thousand people. Lodz was shocked and Rumkowski protested that it was impossible to organize so large an evacuation. He compromised by giving up social "surplusage."

Some five to six thousand dependent persons were sent off.

Lodz soon learned to be less sensitive and Rumkowski less independent. About a year after the Ghetto was sealed off, deportation began in earnest. The Nazis asked for ten thousand men to work, so they said, in the Fatherland. Volunteering was tried and failed. Rumkowski then discovered that there were too many dishonest people about: *thousands* of persons were seized for theft! (It was on this occasion that he threw in the "Three F's," for good measure.) He boasted before a meeting of factory managers that he could have "bought off many of the ten thousand. But I did not want to do it. Not at all. Let them be an example to other thieves." Then the Germans seized fifty-seven mentally ill people; in that case, they said plainly they would do away with them as "unnecessary burdens."

STILL the Jews were encouraged to believe that the worst was over. Like all civilized people, they discounted atrocity stories. Lodz evidently was to be spared—otherwise why would the Germans pour Jews *into* Lodz? In the fall of 1941, about eighteen thousand Jews arrived from nearby towns: twelve smaller communities were thus liquidated. At the same time, 19,980 refugees, better dressed and including many eminent men, were brought from abroad, principally from Berlin, Vienna, and Prague. But reason quailed before Nazi method. Importation, it turned out, was merely a step toward re-deportation; repeated deportations were an inexpensive form of extermination. Dumped onto an already teeming Ghetto, the refugees lived, or rather died, under incredibly difficult circumstances. For example, of the 2,651 persons brought in from nearby Vlotzlavek, only 347 eventually survived. In the following spring, the foreign Jews were ordered re-deported, with the exception of the holders of the German Iron Cross and other small categories. They were allowed to take with them bundles of 12½ kilograms, after having brought fifty kilograms. In a matter of six months the score for these foreign Jews stood:

Originally arrived	19,980
Died in Lodz	6,247
Left in Lodz	3,206
Remainder, deported again	10,527

Half of the refugees were thus disposed of.

BUT that was not enough. The importation of German Jews had meantime been made the excuse for the deportation of natives, for, it was carefully explained—how the Nazis liked to give reasons!—the population of the Ghetto must remain fixed. Was it not already uncomfortably crowded? They therefore demanded the surrender of an equivalent number, in batches of one thousand a day. A conference was called in the Ghetto. Some speakers argued that only the old and very young be delivered: the others stood a better chance to maintain the Ghetto. Others said that the delicate ages were unfit to support the trials which deportation portended. It was decided to send whole families, so as to promote mutual assistance. Dying people, and sometimes even dead, were thrown into the trucks, to make up the figure. "Fooled the Germans!" Then it was noticed that the Germans weren't keeping count at all! Panic seized the Ghetto. The Nazis desisted, but they had sent out almost double the number of foreign refugees. Perhaps sixty thousand people—one-third of the Ghetto—had gone. But where? One of the later refugees brought a letter from the rabbi of Grabow, which is near Lodz:

Grabow, 19 January, 1942

Dearest:

I have received your letter of November 8. I did not wish to answer your questions about the other towns, because there were various reports about them. But, to our misfortune, we know everything now. There was an eyewitness here today, who was there himself, in Hell. The place is the village of Khelmo, near Dombie, and all the Jews are buried there in the forest called Lubow. That is what has happened to the Jews of Koyl, Dombie, Klodeve, and Isbik-Koyavsky. Thousands of Gypsies from Lodz were also brought there and suffered the same fate. Since last week, thousands of Jews from Lodz are arriving there. All these people are being killed by gas poisoning and also by shooting.

The heart turns to stone, the eyes well up. Don't think this is written by a madman. It is the bitter, outrageous truth. Tear your clothes, Son of Man, throw yourself on the ground, run into the streets, and cry

or laugh from sheer madness. Perhaps He Whose Name is Hallowed will come to our help and save the remnant. Help, Creator! Write whether you know of this.

I. Sillman

"And He shall save a remnant"! Did Rumkowski believe it? He was after all in the best position to suspect, if not to know, the worst. Yet his ambition, to the end, seemed tied to the possibility that his realm would be preserved. The miscalculation was astronomical. The fact is that the end of the Ghetto had been determined *before* its birth. The very secret order of *Regierungspraesident* Uebelhor of Kalis, dated December 10, 1939 and circulated only among twelve carefully specified German commands, characterized its establishment as a "transitional measure." "I reserve the precise time, and the means," he declared, "by which the Ghetto, and thereby the city of Lodz, will be cleared of Jews. In any case, our final aim must be to burn out this pest-hole."

NOT the wishes of a Rumkowski alone, but even those of the local German officials were quite irrelevant. It was to their material interest to continue the Ghetto as a source of further profit. But the fate of Lodz, as of the rest of Jewry, lay all the time in the lap of the government at Berlin. And that government, apart from its quite adequate malevolence, was swayed only by the fortunes of war. And the worse the war went for Hitler, the worse it was for the Jews. From 1942 on, Mars no longer smiled on his favorite. Russia was half-occupied but not at all conquered. The United States was straining its vast energies in the production of war supplies. Germany was entering her fourth year of war, and her industrial stocks were running low. It was decided to turn the Ghetto into a work camp consisting only of adults and so use its manpower more fully. Overwork and semi-starvation would eventually dispose of this labor force automatically, and the momentary aim of exploitation would converge upon the initial, and final, aim of annihilation. The two ends would meet in one.

The first hint of trouble came in April 1942 when "declassified" persons were registered for work, on pain of losing their rations. Thousands of men and women

were driven into the shops. Then came the order that all children from five to twelve, and the aged and ailing, must also register—it could hardly be for work. Only a few showed up. Rumkowski threateningly ordered speed. He promised the firemen to spare their families if they would help to round up the youngsters. It was not enough. Rumkowski never avoided responsibility: he placed himself at the head of troops of children and led them to the registration office and thence to the railroad station. They were shipped off. Since Rumkowski truly loved the young, this was the most tragic day in his life, but he was no man to be broken by tragedy, even his own.

But the numbers were reckoned as too slight for the Nazi maw. A more peremptory order came that all children must be given up at once. No reason was given. Fantastic rumors gained credence: they were to be put out to pasture and their blood saved up for wounded German soldiers; they would be raised as "kosher Aryans." Everything seemed possible except only the inevitable. The Jews were badly in need of a St. Tertullian to teach them how to believe the incredible.

Anticipating trouble, Rumkowski called a meeting of the parents. He and his henchmen appealed to their selfishness: many times in Jewish history it has been necessary to sacrifice a part of the people in order to save the rest; such a time had now come; unless the children were given up, everyone else would perish; children could be replaced, but adults . . .; mothers, give up your children, and we will save the Ghetto.

A wail went up from a thousand hearts. Israel wept.

No children were given up. At last, in the fourth week of August 1944 the impatient Germans ordered everybody indoors, cordoned off block after block, and, going from house to house, chased the people into the street. They seized the young, the old, the sick, the ailing, the weak, and pushed them or threw them—frequently literally—into carts and trucks. And off! In orphanages children huddled together crying "*Mir viln nisht shtarbn*" and their chorus echoed far behind the speeding trucks. Even the trained snatchers quailed before this massacre of innocents, and Biebow had to order not only special

pay, but also extra liquor and cigarettes in order to maintain morale.

THE raids of that week netted some fifteen thousand souls, among them several thousand children. Why would anyone bother to keep a precise count? The population of the Ghetto dropped to about seventy thousand, all of whom were *arbeitsfähig*, or nearly all, for a few children were saved by falsely raising their ages and, to make the deception plausible, putting them to especially hard work. We have photographs of children handling smiths' tools which seem heavier than themselves. Soon ninety-five per cent of the people were working—the ideal of full employment. Additional factories opened. Production hummed. The remnant worked for the Wehrmacht, which was in retreat—and so was the remnant.

The mask of "autonomy" was taken off. The post office with its stamps and parcels, the now superfluous schools, the emptied hospitals and orphanages and convalescent homes, were closed one by one. At the same time, a revolution from above deprived Rumkowski of two of the greatest sources of his power. Where the opposition had failed, a clique of creatures of the Germans succeeded. The German and the Jewish head of the Ghetto had never got along well—to the credit of both. Biebow did not trust Rumkowski and Rumkowski could hardly relish the humiliations visited upon him by Biebow. The *Leiter* seized the occasion of the liquidation of the "superfluous" Jews to weaken the authority of the *Aelteste*; he could not dismiss him since the appointment of Rumkowski had been made by superior authorities. The supervision of the factories and the distribution of food—and these, apart from police, were virtually all the "government" a labor camp needed—were turned over, the one to Aaron Jacobovich, a relatively innocuous but narrow-visioned functionary, and the other to David Gertler. Before the war, Gertler had moved on the fringes of the underworld, and then he had snuggled into the congruent graces of the Gestapo. His end was highly characteristic of the regime which had exalted him. One day he was sauntering on a street in the Ghetto, coatless and hatless: an automobile drew up, he was bundled in and whisked off. His successor was quite fitting-

ly the man who had engineered the conspiracy against Rumkowski, one David Marek.

But the *Aelteste* retained the titular leadership. Neither the Jewish nor the German administration could do without him. They soon had need of all his abilities. The revolution had not improved conditions in the Ghetto and the war was going from bad to worse for the Germans. The workers were driven harder and fed more lightly than ever. On much smaller bread rations than the Polish workers just outside, in the city, they produced two-thirds more. German officials reported that many Jews "literally collapsed at their work benches from sheer exhaustion." Rive Kwiatowsky, in stark verse, summed up the life of the Ghetto as thousands of feet dragging corpses to factories.

Restlessness grew. It was apparently becoming more difficult to manage the camp. Informal "literary" circles dared to assume concrete organization. Rumkowski was moved to protest that the Germans were not accorded the customary deference. He commanded that the workers must rise from their benches upon the appearance of a uniform or, as the Russian Jew of old used to say, a *knepl*, and must not sit down again until all the uniforms had filed in and a factory hand, previously designated for this purpose, had given the order "*Wiedearbeiten!*" In the street, Jewish police and firemen must spring to attention upon passing a German military or even a civil official, Jewish civilians must bare their heads, women bow. The "sharpest penalties" were threatened for keeping hands in pockets or cigarette in mouth while saluting.

IT was evidently getting dark. By the middle of 1944 the tide of war had turned decisively. The Germans were speeding out of Russia and the Anglo-Americans were fighting on the continent. In August came the order to liquidate the remainder of the Jews and to raze the Ghetto. Intent, as always, on performing outrage quietly and inexpensively, the Germans again called for volunteers. Rumkowski arranged a mass meeting and Biebow himself addressed it. He told the Jews that their destination was Germany, and assured them, on the word of honor of a German official, that there

they would find work and good treatment. "Pack up your things," he concluded, "and present yourselves" at the railroad station. Few responded.

It was Rumkowski's turn. In repeated proclamations he insisted that it was to the interest of the Jews themselves to co-operate freely. Pressure, and force, had nevertheless to be invoked. In factory after factory, the workers were told to show up in a body, with their families. The recalcitrants—and there were many, for Rumkowski had to issue order after order to the same factories—were hunted down in their homes and the homes of friends. Those who concealed themselves and anybody who helped them were to be executed. Finally section after section of the Ghetto was blocked off and cleared.

EVERY day, in the months of August and September 1944, long trains of packed and sealed freight cars pulled out of the railway station of Lodz and headed for extermination camps, mostly for Auschwitz. After a few days of dragging and shunting they arrived, by design, in the dead of night. The doors were unsealed and the Jews—leaving many dead of suffocation, starvation, and disease behind them—descended. They were immediately divided into two long files. Feeling their arms and muscles and tapping their chests, Nazi troopers hustled the weak into the line that led, in a matter of days, to gas and fire. Of the healthy, in the second line, many were also destroyed in the camps, more or less at random, but others found their way to labor camps, there to

die more slowly from overwork and inhuman treatment. The rare survivors belonged largely to this more fortunate file.

Back in the Ghetto, several hundred men were left to gather up, for the Germans, the few remaining valuables and then to destroy the houses. Another group of a few hundred people managed to conceal themselves underground. Several weeks later an informer led the Nazis to the hide-out, but it was too late. The order to present themselves for another "registration" was disobeyed. The Russian armies were approaching and German discipline collapsed. When the Russians marched in, twelve hundred-odd people greeted them, the remnant of nearly a quarter-million Jews of the great industrial city of Lodz, the Manchester of the East.

And Rumkowski?

One day, during the final liquidation, he was standing on the station platform overseeing the loading of cars. A German official, reading from a list of deportees, summoned Rumkowski's brother to enter the train. The Jewish dictator asked that he be allowed to stay.

The official refused curtly but invited Rumkowski to go along, if he wished. Rumkowski joined his brother on the train. That is one version of his end. Another is that the Nazi command gave him a sealed letter addressed to the chief of the camp of destination and assured him that he would of course receive special treatment.

When the transport arrived at the death camp, Rumkowski and his family were the first to be thrust into the gas chamber.

THIS essay is based on an examination of materials in this country—principally in the archives of the Yiddish Scientific Institute (Yivo) of New York—and in Europe: the *Getto Zeitung*, official proclamations, school registers, photographs, stamps, coins, etc.; on German documents, notably those edited by A. Eisenbach, *Dokumenty i Materialy*, Vol. III, *Getto Lodzkie* (Warsaw, 1946); on survivors' published accounts, such as Israel Tabaksblatt, *Hurban Lodz: Zechs Yur Nazi-Gehenim* (Buenos Aires, 1946), and writings of some who did not survive, for example, S. Shayevitch, *Lech Lecho* (Lodz, 1946); on interviews with survivors now in the United States, France, and Italy, some of whom worked in Rumkowski's administration; on articles in *Yivo Bleter* (New York), *Fun Letzten Hurban* (Munich), *Shriftn far literatur, kunst un gezelschaftliche fragn* (Kassel), *Dos Naye Lebn* (Lodz), *Unzer Shtime* (Paris), *Morning Freiheit*, *Jewish Morning Journal*, and *Forward* (New York), and other publications; and on L. Felde, "Lodz—le Manchester Polonais" (*Bulletin de la société Neuchateloise de géographie*, Vol. XLIII).—S.F.B.